1: Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1928-1929) 1934
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Saramacca

THE COUNCIL OF THE ELDERS

"I have my obia from Lamé," Bayo had said. "People like me because of this obia."

When we came to Lamé we found that the people who inhabited it controlled more than the love obia. They had a powerful fighting obia, too. There was not only *bumba*, that gave power in love, but also *poitchi*, the obia that helped a man in a fight. But one who wanted to become a great hunter did not go to Lamé. Such a person sought out an obia man of the Dombi clan, who, working with the power of *mafungi*, helped him to see his game in the dark bush, though the animal was of the color of the bush itself, and, once having tracked it, helped him make his aim deadly. A man suffering from a bad gunshot wound would try to get an obia man from the Loango people to come and call on the powers of the Loango clan-obia to heal the dying man. For broken bones there was magic in the sacred village of Dahomey where centered the Kasito clan, and at Dahomey was also the best magic on the river for warriors. *'Bofyuando* and *sokoma'usu* were the two great warrior obias, and so powerful were they that if one but whispered their names, without taking the stems of two weeds, putting one crosswise on top of the other, and over them passing a coin to recompense for speaking the sacred names, the man who spoke would die. These obias belonged to the Kasito people, so strong in magic.

Of these clans there might be twelve or thirteen or fourteen. Among the Saramacca people, we learned, the clan partakes of the mysterious, the awesome. Our Bush Negro friends did not discuss their clans readily, and none of them would give us a list of their names. A few might be mentioned by one man, a few by another.

"To speak of the *lo* is not a thing for strangers," we were told. "My clan I can name, and another man can tell you the name of his clan. My father's clan I can name, too, but not others."

On one occasion we had made clear to a young man who had been away for some time in French Guiana, and who considered himself a man of the world, why we sought the

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the tasks which will fall to his lot when he reaches adulthood. Half in play, the boys and girls help their elders and in that way learn how to work, how to conduct themselves, how to sing and dance, how to make cicatrizations, and how to pray to the gods. What they learn when they come by their gods is also taught them by members of their family. A boy's father and maternal uncles instruct him in the gods they give him. A girl is made familiar with the will of her gods and their manner of worship when her mother and her mother's sisters give their gods to her. Knowledge is, therefore, shared in the family, and much of it, the Bush Negro says, comes to each individual from his gods, since not every boy who watches a fine carver can rival the carving of his teacher. When he does show promise of excellence at a given task, it is because he, too, has a god who helps him do his carving. It is the same with drumming, and singing, and telling stories, and making love.

But obia is learned formally and slowly. An obia man may teach his own brother, or his sister's ablest son, or his own son, even, what he knows, but the learning process will be gradual, for no man may disclose too much to an untrained mind. At times, however, an obia man trains men who are not related to him. He may himself decide upon a young man of promise to whom he cares to impart his knowledge. A considerable sum of money may be offered him by members of an influential family who wish to have an obia man of their own kin and who send a young man to him for training. In a dream or during possession it may become known that the ancestors wish a certain young man to apprentice himself to the obia man they name.

The apprenticeship lasts from three months to a year. The novice goes to live with the obia man, working with him and observing all that his master does. During this period of intensive training he goes with the obia man into the bush and is shown the herbs which heal. He is trained in the manner of bathing for the *ak'a*—the soul—

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and how to cure fever, and fio-fio. He is shown how to make obia medicine for lesions of the skin, and for colds, and for diseases of children. He is taught the protective obias for the woman who conceives, and those which help conception, the obias which keep people safe on the river, and those which guard them in the bush against enemy spirits.

It may be, too, that during this first period of training, the initiate is shown how to trap and treat the snakes from which the snake "cuttee" is made. This cure for snake bite is famous in Suriname among Bush Negroes and whites alike, but the secret of preparing the cuttee is known to the Bush Negroes alone.

While the young man is in training, he may not go with a woman, and there are many more prohibitions which he must observe.

"Not all men can become obia men."

"Does a man need obia in order to have Kromanti?" we asked.

"To have Obia Kromanti, yes. . . . Now do not ask about Kromanti, white man," said Bayo's uncle with a smile. "Only a Kromanti man knows about Kromanti. Do not ask, because I cannot tell you."

5

Men and women constantly drifted to our base camp with carvings for our collection. Many brought us obias. Some of these obias they took from their persons and sold to us, but others were newly made for us, for some of those they themselves wore, they would not part with, whatever the inducement.

"Why do you want my obia, white man?" a Bush Negro asked one day. "Do you want an obia to carry you well to your country? I will make one for you, but do not ask for mine. Mine has kept me in good health. I cannot give away an obia which has served me well. The spirits would be angered."

He returned after a day with one which resembled his own, and as he gave it, he placed it on the upturned palms

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of the earth. In one kingdom, a ruler sent the heralds to proclaim throughout the land that he who killed the bird would get half his kingdom, and his daughter in marriage. Anansi, the spider, killed a hawk and brought it to the ruler. But Anansi lied when he said this was the bird that shook the earth with its cries. At the very time he was trying to persuade all the people that this was the bird, the cries of the ominous bird were heard. So they put Anansi in jail. Now one day there was born to a woman a child who at birth wore a cloth of pieced designs, and a hunting sack. This boy said to his mother, he said, "Give me a little water, mother, and I will go out into the world to learn wisdom. God has sent me to kill the bird which troubles mankind."

When the boy grew to manhood he succeeded in trapping this bird that knew how to cook obia without fire. He killed the bird and took the obia pot with him, and that is how he came by the secrets of obia. He passed on his knowledge to the men of his family, and this has been going on till today, so that obia is being spread throughout the world by the descendants of this man who killed the bird that knew obia.

But obia was not one thing only.

"Obia," Bayo's uncle had said, "is first of all the spirit. It is everywhere. But there are many kinds of obia. There is black man's obia, and there is white man's obia. Here in the bush black man's obia is the strongest.

"A man who has the obia spirit makes obia to wear, and obia to drink, and obia to rub the body with, and obia water for bathing. He can make obia drums and obia benches. The spirit tells you how to do things, and it tells you what to do. When we say a man has strong obia, we mean his spirit is strong."

The Bush Negro obia man, said Bayo to us one day, knew the things the white doctor knew—he knew how to heal—and he knew other things, too. He knew how to keep sickness away. The things an obia man gave for healing were

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called obias. The charms he gave for warding off illness and evil were obias, too.

"So we call all these things. But each obia has a name. Every charm I wear is an obia, but if I wore the one you are wearing, it would be a soul cord, an *ak'a tetei*. One below the knee we call *asumani* in my village, and one for the wrist *afimu*. The one on the upper arm is named *ando*. But there are many names, and they are all obia, because inside them is the spirit obia which gives them power. When a man sells you an obia and passes its power on to you, he breathes on your hands as they hold the obia. When he does it, he gives you the obia spirit which went into the making of this obia. If he did not make it himself, the spirit was given him by the obia man, and he gives it to you."

Obia, then, is the spirit; obia is the preventive and curing agent; obias are the charms that are worn by people to help them. Some have called these obias "fetiches," but even a slight understanding of them should be enough to bring the outsider to the realization that the object of itself is meaningless, and that it is only the power that has been given the charm that makes it effective.

Yet it is not strange that the importance of the fetich has been overestimated, for if the visitor did not draw out the Bush Negroes about their gods and their theories of the universe, the existence of these higher powers would almost go unrecognized. For everywhere there are to be found obias guarding the village, obias screening paths, obias worn by the people. That they are important to the Bush Negro is obvious. But they are important for day-by-day existence, and they do not possess the overwhelming importance of the great spirits who control the universe.

Many of these charms came to us as tangible evidence of the belief in obia. Some of those we acquired were of a unique character because of the power that was latent in them, some because of the intricacy of their taboos. Yet all of them paled in interest and in arresting quality beside the Kromanti Mama that came to us one night in secret.

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361 the trading-post, are so large as to have street-like roads extending across them. Others like Nu have only eight or nine huts.

342 The walls and roofs of the dwellings are made of grasses and reeds, intricately woven into a herring-bone pattern that can be seen in the photographs. So tightly are they woven that the jungle rain does not penetrate. The uprights are hewn out of tree trunks, and those that form the doorway are [322] often deeply carved. So great is the decorative spirit of these people that every common utensil is carved until it becomes a work of art.

The roofs extend far beyond the walls, so that the projecting part throws a shadow on the walls, which lowers the temperature inside. In front, the roof extends a yard or more to form a shade in which the blacks may palaver. In front of the huts, always, babies are grubbing about in the dirt and yelling prodigiously.

Here and there are slightly dilapidated huts. They belong [768] to people now dead. No one will live in them or venture to repair the ruin of time. Neglected, they sink into decay. The ● [756] witch doctor's hut is also a bit frowzy; it seems to be a badge of his profession, like the sugar cane planted alongside his doorway or the turtle-shell impaled on a staff near by. All three are symbols of his calling.

352 A wall of woven mat divides some of the huts into two [353] rooms, the back room being used for sleeping. The men have hand-made hammocks of woven cotton or grass. Their wives 342 are provided with sleeping-mats on the floor. The front room

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342

A Witch Doctor's House, Upper Surinam River. The sugar-cane stalks and the turtle shell impaled on a staff are badges of this profession.

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drums carry farther toward heaven than the talkee-talkee of a lone supplicant.

It is not easy to distinguish between the primitive's magic and his medicine. In the village organization a distinction is sometimes made between the *medicine man,* who is concerned with remedies for sickness, and the *obeiah priest,* whose business is charms and rituals. There are two or three obeiah priests to each village. Their profession is the propitiation of spirits, that is, magic and religion. The magic of the obeiah men is largely secret. Once we arrived at a village while a ritual of some nature was going on. Pots were stewing in the centre of the clearing, while obeiah men were moving around them. One held a rattle, which he shook monotonously. The bahkra was asked to leave. It was magic in the making.

The Bush Negroes possess an extensive system of primitive medicine. Various roots, herbs, and nuts are gathered in the jungle, and their use is mingled with various superstitions. The witch doctor or medicine man who prepares infusions from these herbs holds no exalted position in the esteem of the villagers; he is simply following a particular profession to which no special prestige is attached. He may, however, be an obeiah priest in addition to being a medicine man.

He prepares several kinds of medicine, among them the *snakee-kutti,* or snake-bite cure. It cures the bites of all reptiles and makes the person immune from future attack. Snakee-kutti is made in this way: a venomous snake is killed and the head and the tail-end are cut from the body; the tail

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756 789 278 is placed in the mouth of the snake and the whole is roasted over a slow fire, along with certain herbs. Incantations accompany the business. After the materials are thoroughly charred they are reduced to a homogeneous powder, which is administered in two ways: first, internally, and second, by making a small incision in the arm and rubbing some of the powder into the wound. At first we were inclined to think that some of the venom might remain in the poison glands of the reptile's head, and so act as an antigen to set up a real immunity. But the heat of the roasting fire would probably destroy any such toxin remaining, leaving the resultant powder non-antigenic.

Even in Paramaribo enthusiastic accounts of the marvellous powers of snakee-kutti are common. It is supposed by some to have the power of making snakes turn and flee. Being curious we tried it ourselves, but noticed no effects.

778 789 Some doctors are skilled in the preparation of a certain strength-giving concoction especially in demand by Bush Negroes before a fight. If by the following day the combat has not taken place, the man who swallowed the medicine must get it out of his system by hacking viciously at a tree with his bush-knife; otherwise he will become ill.

According to Abaisa, men who drink this magic potion sometimes become so strong that with one blow of the machete they can make all the leaves of a tree fall off.

Bathing is another way of acquiring extraordinary strength. Three baths in water infused with *bimbe* leaves will give a man the power to pick a red-hot axe-head out of the midst

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164 The Djukas suffer from a number of diseases also common among white men. Yaws, a syphilis-like disease, caused by infection with *Spironema pertenue,* is frequently found among them. Individuals may be seen suffering from all three stages of it. Malaria, including the severe tropical form, is spread by the mosquitoes along the rivers. An ulcerous condition known as leishmaniasis, the result of infection by Leishman-Donovan bodies, is an ordinary occurrence, as is hookworm. The Town Negroes are occasionally infected with filariasis and schistosomyasis of the rectal type. Leprosy is present in the town of Paramaribo, but we saw none of it in the bush.

648 757 [515] [204] The Djukas do not fear to take the bahkra's medicine. The gratitude of more than one mother was earned when we gave her child castor oil. Of the principle of asepsis, naturally, the Djukas know nothing. Their incisions for making *cutty-cutty* (ornamental scars) are septic enough to give a bacteriologist nightmares.

On one occasion, snakee-kutti, the snake protector, did not work, and a Bush Negro, who had been bitten was taken to the hospital at Moengo. His leg had gone untreated for five days and was in the serious stage of gangrene. The limb was amputated by the doctor in charge and the Djuka made an uneventful recovery. He would not have been brought to the hospital by his family if there had been anything more for the Bush Negro medicine man to do. But there was not, and they went to the bahkra as the last resort to save his life.

778 ● 756 Far up the Surinam River is the sacred medicine city of Dahomey (pronounced Daumay). Into its sacred precincts

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the white man has never been allowed to enter. A spirit named *Hini* hovers over the town, and it is he, not the Djukas, who would be offended by the presence of a bahkra. People seriously ill are brought to Dahomey from the surrounding villages. The witch doctors there, old women as well as old men, and occasionally a virgin, administer their potent charms. Only young married women are debarred from the profession of medicine among the Djukas.

Here also comes the Granman of the Saramaccaner tribe, to undergo the sacred ritual before making his annual visit to Paramaribo. He receives absolution from the Dahomey medicine men in preparation for his sojourn among the bahkras. The ceremony is known as *makee suka*, or putting himself in favour with the gods.

Our friend Abaisa, headman of Lombe, tells us something of the Dahomey rituals. To mend a broken bone the patient is shut up in a small hut with the doctor and three white cocks. The first fowl is killed by having its neck wrung, the blood from its beak running on the floor of the hut as a sacrifice to Amu, the ground god. The second fowl is cut open for inspection. If the bladder is light in colour the prognosis is good, but if dark the reverse is the case. The third cock has its leg bone broken at a point approximately corresponding to the patient's fracture. After this both the fowl and the human patient undergo daily treatment at the hands of the doctor, to the accompaniment of prayers to Amu and the shaking of rattles to scare off the evil spirits. The nature of the treatment could not be ascertained, but on the day when

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obeiahs, house gods, fetish houses, menstrual huts, and matrilineal system of inheritance are all to be found as ancient customs among the forest tribes of the West Coast. Other details, such as the use of chickens for sacrificial animals, the huts with their rectangular walls, the manufacture of butter from the palm worm, the sacredness of snakes and alligators, the use of drums for religious supplication, and the beating of them with the hand instead of with a stick as the Indians do, are also customs which are similar to West African customs and probably derived from them. The impaled turtle-shell on a staff, the badge of the witch doctor's profession, represents the symbol for the female genitalia among some West African tribes. The Bush Negroes' boats and paddles are typically African in design. The *awasa* dance of the Saramaccaners was borrowed from the Aucaners, among whom it is a direct West African survival.

From the study of these culture survivals among the Djuka tribes it can be seen that most of the jungle civilization of the Bush Negroes is derived from their West African ancestry, modified here and there by contact with the Indians of their new home. The remainder of the material culture of the Bush Negroes is borrowed from the white settlements along the coast, from which gunpowder, fish-hooks, bush-knives, and other articles filter upstream.

[p. 192 is blank]

/20 cont./

262 milk. She does eat cheese, however, saying that there is absolutely no milk in it.

/21/ Chapter XIII

Diseases, Afflictions, and so forth

164 The greatest affliction among them, too, is the lepra boasi (leprosy and elephantiasis Fuchs), venereal diseases, leg and body 757 pains, and sores. They cure themselves mainly with herbs, which they possess in great quantities and with which they frequently work with special success. They cut open abcesses themselves; in most cases they cup themselves, making the cups from small calabashes. [824] For many pains they rub themselves with spirits steeped in paradise seed (1) and with carapa oil, which they get from the carapa nuts (2).

1. Sem. paradisie Ningre kondre pepre from the Amomum paradise Afsel.

2. Carapa gujanens Obl.

755 In difficult cases and dangerous illnesses, however, they ask for advice from the Cromantie gado, which can only be done by means of song and dance, on which occasion a great deal is drunk. • [756] A wentie man (African idol-priest or priestess) qualified for this, or an influential person, is able by means of drink, song, and dance among the others to excite himself to such an extent that in a mad way, without consciousness of what he is doing, he makes superhuman leaps, turnings, and twistings with his body, jumps and dances in the fire, until he finally falls to the ground unconscious and, rolling like a tub, foaming at the mouth, utters the most repulsive and strange sounds, which lasts until he is finally put down somewhere for dead. So long as he remains lying without any movement or sound as if in a deep sleep, one may absolutely not come near him or touch him, but must always take care to keep out of his way in his course and not to hinder him in anything.

/247 cont./

789 the object to which is attached a magic force, as well as that force itself. But there is no confusion in their minds; the object
[755] is only a simple support, it is nothing by itself. The traveler who sees them prepare an infusion of leaves for a sick person may be tempted to believe that they attach to this leaf the power of acting against a certain disease; that would be an error, they attach to these leaves and to the white clay, pemba, the power of holding, /248/ of condensing the vital force which emanated from a certain god. It is the god which "makes obia," and not men; men do nothing but collect this energy and apply it.

755 789 The Boni distinguish two categories of magic remedies:

--Those which come from a god through the medium of a possessed person. The god must be consulted each time, and the remedy it gives is effective only for the asker alone, and for a limited time; it can act only when the god has been paid, usually in the form of drink or piece of cloth; in principle nothing is owed to the possessed person (they admit that he benefits by the payment made to the god), but the custom is to give him a bottle of tafia.

Consultation of a possessed person is in the eyes of the Refugee Blacks the normal mechanism by which the obia descends from the god to men.

755 776 Certain Ampuku gods might give remedies effective for a particular disease and for any asker, remedies which could be transmitted from one man to another. Unfortunately we could not obtain exact information about this.

755 756 --Those whose origin is unknown, and which have been transmitted from one man to another for a very long time. It is believed that these are remedies which were found empirically by a man in days past; this is the case with many remedies specific for this or that disease.

In such a case payment is made to the possessor of the remedy and to him alone.

/248 cont./

755 823 [194] White clay, pémba (the word and the rite are of Congolese origin), does not undergo any special preparation. In the thought of the Refugee Blacks it has the power to fix upon a man's body the magic influence of the infusion of leaves.

791 Among the Boni, except for the cult of Odun, there are no priests, strictly speaking, invested with a function at the same time social and religious. A large number of persons

• 756 791 are regarded as "knowing remedies." This notion implies at once knowledge and power. In general the obiamã is believed to hold only a specialized power: for example, he knows how to prepare a hunting obia, or an obia for protection against wisimã. This power he received from his father (as an exception, it seems, from his uncle), who instructed him, before dying, in the specialized rites it requires and transmitted his power to him by giving him mula.

To give mula to someone, one blows into his hands, one puts them on his head while uttering a formula by which one transmits to him a certain power or piece of magic knowledge.

What is the criterion of legitimacy? Who has the right to call himself an obiamã? It seems that basically everything is reduced to this: the obiamã has the conviction, the sensation that he holds this power; as for his clients, they believe they observe the efficacy of his obia; if they stop having confidence in his remedy, they will abstain from coming to ask it of him, that is all; no social prohibition comes to limit the action of

[754] the obiamã. The grand man intervenes only against someone who might claim to hold remedies to harm another person or to capture his will, which would be wisi.

[888] /249/ The Boni accept the possibility of deception as regards obia, especially by people who are too young, but they have the conviction that the elders (people over 55-60) possess wisdom and that one can apply to them with complete confidence.

/254 cont./

784 If someone realizes that he has broken his kina, he goes
752 to see, not an Obiaman, but the specialist-healer of leprosy
751 and asks him to treat him by way of prevention.

411 Beliefs about guns and hunting. The gun, which entered the
832 everyday life of the Refugee Blacks two centuries ago, has taken
[177] an important place in their magic. It is the symbol of virility.
[558] A Refugee Black who no longer has a gun is a man humiliated and almost dishonored. As one of them explained to us in begging us to help him replace his old gun eaten by rust: "If you cannot present yourself before the women with a machete, hunting bag on your shoulder, and gun in your hand, you are not a man."

411 This idea has been transposed onto the plane of magic
954 and they take for granted that the wisimi can, by putting evil spells on a gun, attack the owner of the weapon in his virility. It is supposed to be enough for someone to put his finger into the barrel of the gun while uttering a formula of vengeance, or even being moved by hate for the owner of the weapon, for this gun to be no longer capable of hitting the mark. So, to avoid these misfortunes, the Boni never part with their guns and never lend them to anyone. If, in spite of these precautions, they
411 789 have the impression that a gun no longer fires so well, they will go to an Obiaman to have it washed of maleficent influence. There exist for that purpose several remedies all of which consist of soaking the gun for one to three days in infusions of leaves, which has the unfailing result of making it rust. We have seen a hammerless, latest model gun spoiled thus by an intelligent Boni head boatman, a clever mechanic and usually full of good sense.

224 We have never witnessed among the Boni any individual or collective hunting rites claiming to attract game or to promote meeting it (when, on the contrary, hunting playes are extremely widespread among the Creoles).

/298 cont./

114 Here desirous of remaining on the plane of strict scientific objectivity, we shall avoid entering the discussion of the benefit springing from this action, which, moreover, would necessitate a long development. We shall limit ourselves to showing that it appears to us to be doomed to failure.

871 177 --The experiment of schooling has been made for more than 30 years among the Boni in the village of Kotika. Half a dozen children, doing well in their studies, left for Surinam and broke with their native group. In the others, the teaching received left only faint traces. As a matter of fact, there is no room in a normal intelligence to receive at the same time the mass of technical knowledge necessary for holding one's own in the society of the Refugee Blacks and ordinary school instruction. One necessarily drives out the other; now the Boni are extremely fond of their free life on the great river, which assures them very satisfactory material conditions of living. [829]

797 177 194 --Evangelization has been carried on with perseverance for more than 200 years with the Refugee Blacks of Surinam. It has not given appreciable results. It has been the same in French Guiana with the action carried on with the Saramaka working /299/ near the communes of the coast (1), and more recently with the Boni of the Upper Maroni.

[648]

[756] [787]

1. The Saramaka not only have no tendency to be converted, but they exert a significant influence on the population of the communes. On the Oyapok the Saramaka healer has numerous clients, and in spite of the clergy's interdiction, many women go to the possession dances of the Papa gudu serpent gods.